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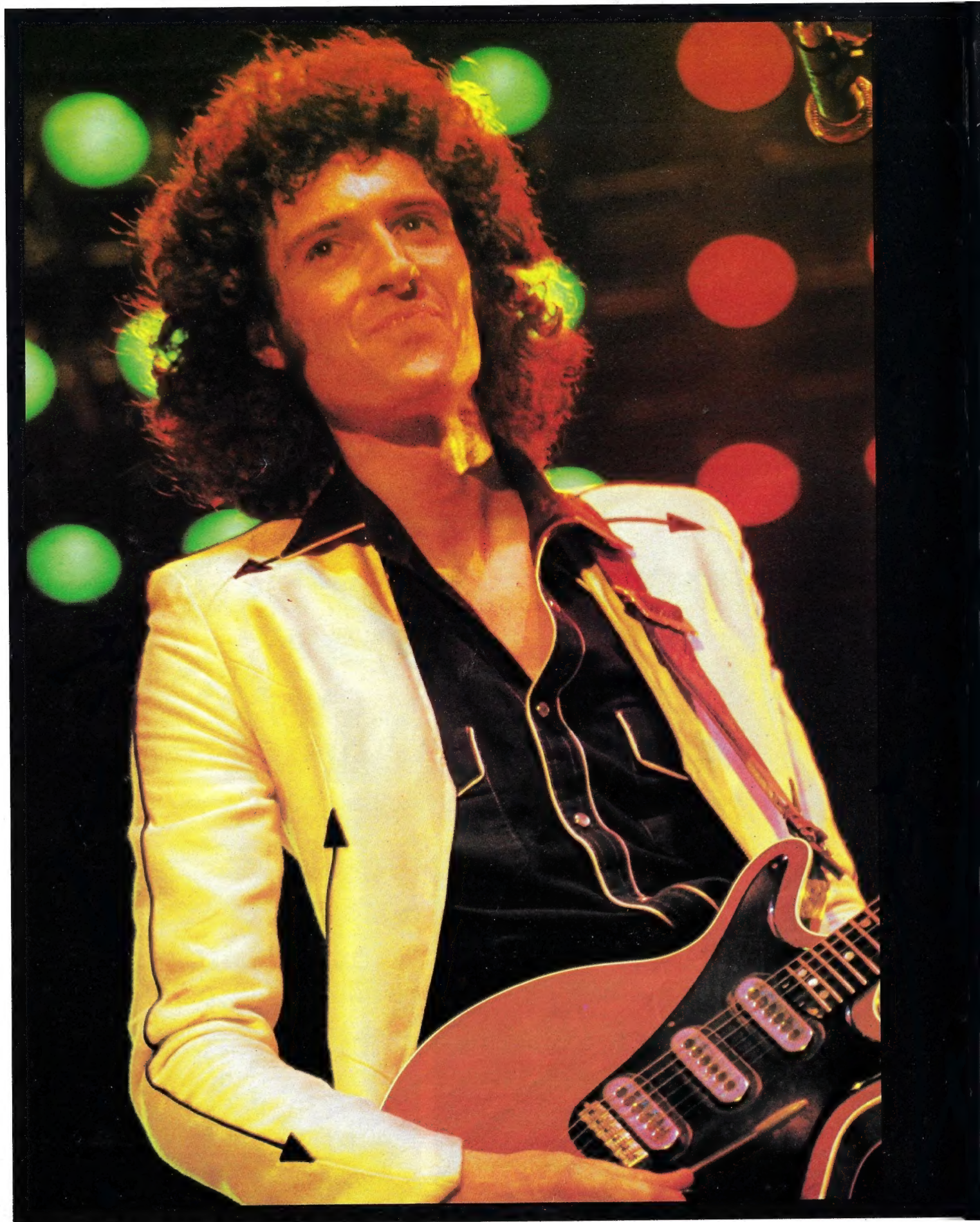
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Brian May

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Brian May Queen for a day

How does one account for the enormous popularity the group Queen, which has been growing steadily for nearly a decade? Never a "critic's band", Queen has survived and prospered in the face of the kind of journalistic overkill that would have withered and destroyed other rock bands. Queen helped usher in an age of dramatic, theatrical rock presentations, fronted by the flamboyant stage presence of Freddie Mercury, the group's lead singer and main conceptual force, somehow resolving the lyric gracefulness of the Beatles with the bludgeoning power of what has come to be known as heavy metal — a grand, operatic vision that looms larger than life, as followers of their live shows can attest. Queen is both folkloric and modern, mystic and decadent, poetic and profane, artful and obvious... calculated? Sure, but with professionalism and class, instead of the rampant stupidity and sloppiness that passes for "excitement" in too many arena venues. Love 'em or loathe 'em, no one can deny their exceptional musicianship or stunning concert presentation.

Built on the rock-solid foundation of John Deacon's subtle, insinuating bass lines and Roger Taylor's powerhouse drumming, it is nevertheless clear that the signature sound of Queen comes from Brian May's dense, keening layers of chords and counterpoint. Though May has been largely overlooked in the pantheon of modern guitar heroes, as subtlety, taste and melodic invention become more and more viable in arena rock (how long will people remain excited by re-hashed Chuck Berry/Bo Diddley licks played at 140 decibels?) his creative flair will grow more and more important.

Queen has grown steadily throughout the last decade, from the

Olympian bluster of their earliest days to the anachronistic r'n'b/disco stance of "Another One Bites The Dust" (a fairly straightforward evolution of Chic's groover "Good Times" — practically public domain seeing how many people have borrowed from it). What does the future hold for Brian May and Queen? In this, May's most extensive interview ever, the reserved, thoughtful guitarist suggests clues to the past, present and future of Queen and his own growth as an instrumentalist and arranger. In the process he offers aspiring musicians and bands some very valuable insights as far as the business of playing and the playing of this business.

What has the band been working on of late; any new projects or recordings you could tell us about?

We're quite well into the next studio album, and we've taken this little break because that's the way we did our last album, and found it worked quite well to work real hard, then to rest a spell, and in that break, new ideas would come to us when we were relaxed. And we found that we got more actual input that way, without becoming stale. In fact, this is the longest actual holiday we've had in some time.

We think that people get the wrong impression about bands like Queen; that they do an album every year, they come out and tour for a couple of months, and then the rest of the time they're goofing off.

Yeah, laying on the beach or something.

What sort of things have you been working on for your next record? Are there any surprises or any particular new sounds and ideas that people might not expect. Because obviously the last record, *The Game*, was quite a departure for Queen.

We like to try and imagine that we get bored with something well before everybody else does, so we tend to move away from things quite quickly and get on to the next. Already the things we're working on for the next album are quite different in that it's very heavily rhythmic...

As in the funk angle of *The Game*, like "Another One Bites The Dust"?

Kind of, but it's different again... sparser... it's hard to describe, really. That's only a few of the songs, and we have other stuff, but it's the next step on rhythmically. I mean, most of our older music was heavy stuff that was good to bang your head to, but not to dance to. *The Game* did have a bit more of that feeling... not exactly disco, but much more rhythmic.

Well, that's the funk influence

coming in, like Chic, but then there's also that rockabilly edge of "Crazy Little Thing..." which is obviously very danceable, and when you get down to the basic roots, very black.

Yes, God knows...

The thing is, when you say sparser, do you mean that you are further de-emphasizing the chorale effects of the vocals and the guitars, or are you stripping down the sound even further? Because that, in fact, is the Queen sound that people really recognize... that enormous overlay of guitars and voices.

Generally there's a few signs of that sound — there always is, particularly on the new album. But there is a lot more leaving of spaces, which we're very keen on. It seems that the more space you leave, the harder the music hits you when it's there.

Well, did you reach a point where it seemed that the stacking of sounds was reaching a point of diminishing returns, because that seemed to reach an incredible peak with *A Night At The Opera* and *A Day At The Races*?

Right, that was it, and we felt we had done it and there was no sense in doing it much more, except in very small tastes when it seemed appropriate. I think we could have gone on doing it for a while, but as I said, we wanted to go on to the next step. But those trademarks are always there — that's very easy for us to do, the harmonies and all the harmony in time...

Maybe it was too easy, might that be a part of it?

Yeah, I suppose so (laughter).

It's just that we remember having a discussion with Todd Rundgren once, and he told us that the reason he stopped writing pop-oriented things was that it was too easy, there was no challenge to it anymore.

Sure, it's very easy for us to make a record where people could say, "ah, that's a Queen record." It's harder to try different sorts of things. It's also harder to work within a tighter discipline, which we've tended towards lately... that sparseness. It's easier in the sense that it's easier to get to on stage, and I don't have to be worried about reaching for my echo box to double-track the harmonies. It's hard in the sense that you're very naked — you have your instruments and nothing else.

Has doing these different sounds on records, like the rockabilly things, and the very sparse funk stuff, and even that Beatley type ballad like "Need Your Love Tonight" — a very poppy song — has that forced you, as a guitarist, to change your approach to

the songs or the instrument? By not working with all the effects and layers of guitars it's like going back to square one.

That's right, it has. It's made me particularly aware of the rhythm side which I'd gotten away from, when I was blasting away, and filling up all the spaces so that it sounded deep. But now I'm moving in precisely the opposite direction.

So how has this affected you in the studio as an arranger. Let's go back to "Crazy Little Thing..." again. How did you work that out?

Oh, it's Freddie really. Fred just wrote the song and played acoustic guitar along with it, and I was going to play over it; it was just a rough backing track, but when we played it back it sounded fine, so we kept Freddie's acoustic. The only thing I did on that riff was the little solo (laughter). That's it. Life's gettin' really easy for me.

Well, you didn't really have to do much on "Another One Bites The Dust" either. That's mostly Roger and John.

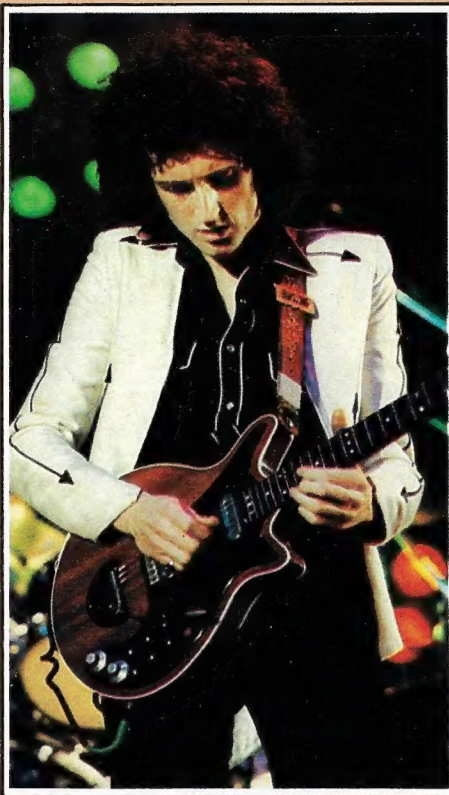
That's right, John did most of that, and all I did was add a few little punctuations. Maybe you should pick another song.

All right, what about "Need Your Love Tonight" then? As someone who had never really played in that Beatlesque style, did you have to go back and listen to some of those songs, to get your bearings straight again? What we're trying to figure out is how a guitarist can get locked into one kind of sound he becomes identified with, like you have.

The harmony side of things was a change, but the way that we played it was very much us. You see, that was a bit too easy. I thought of that as a very stock item as far as the guitar playing, there wasn't much challenge to that. That came together quite easily. It's interesting the way it's mixed, because it's mixed half electric, and half acoustic, which I guess also gives you that Beatles sound. But that was once again, just a question of leaving on the rhythm guitar, which Freddie did.

He's taking over your job. How do you see yourself as the guitarist in Queen with Freddie exerting his influence, and new sounds coming in? We'd think that you would have to re-think what your approach would be, not just to the material, but to the instrument.

It doesn't worry me that the way I play guitar the easiest isn't used that



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much. We all go through different phases. I still enjoy playing the rock stuff; as a guitarist I have to, and on stage it's still pretty much that way. But you just use what's necessary, and the *Flash Gordon* stuff, for instance, seemed to suggest using synthesizers, so we didn't feel any compunctions in doing that; we just went out and did it, and the guitar and synthesizers worked well together. And on the new album it's very possible that we'll use an orchestra for the first time. So we don't feel constrained to stay in any set pattern, and I get as much enjoyment out of the writing side as the playing side. There's plenty of material on every album where I was responsible for writing it pretty much from the ground up. So there's that side to it as well. If I'm honest, there are probably some times when I get frustrated and want to put on more guitar (laughter), but then you have to look at it from the point-of-view of the way the song should be put across, and then it might not be such a good idea.

Was there a point at which you had achieved a certain sound and became identified with that sound?

I feel that if there was such a point it was probably around *A Day At The Races* and *A Night At The Opera*. *A Day At The Races* was like a

clear-out of all the stuff we had left ... we did those two albums more or less as one work, and they took an enormously long stretch of studio time, and we felt we had arrived at some sort of watershed there, and we more or less decided that it was time to take off into some new sounds.

It isn't just that there's a Queen sound, but there is an identifiable Brian May sound. At a recent NAMM show, a guitarist was demonstrating an amp, and he switched into a particular distortion mode by saying, "and here's that Brian May sound."

(Laughter) Well, I must go out and buy one of those, right? There really isn't very much to my set-up, you know. There's a guitar, which I made, and that's part of it, and a very simple one-stage preamplifier with a bit of bass cut and some crude treble boost. And a Vox AC30, 30 watt amplifier. I would say that the most important factor is the AC30, because it just has that particular tonal quality to it. It's a Class A amplifier, which is a different sort of animal than most rock & roll amplifiers. It has a real warmth and at the same time a very cutting edge to it, so that it'll sustain without getting too distorted.

Had you tried other amplifiers?

Yeah, I've tried most things that were around — ten years ago (laughter). The Vox just had that certain sound that I'd always been looking for, a sound that was in my head. The main thing I've used with the Vox was a repeat box — which is a modified Echoplex — where I've extended the range on it and turned down the sustain to nothing so that you get just one single repeat back; and that gives me a delay of between a ½ second and 2½ seconds. I've used that to build up layers of harmony and to engage in simple kinds of counterpoint to fill out the stage sound.

The result is almost like a kind of orchestral feedback. There's that high-pitched tone, but it has real melodic quality to it.

I was always into melody, as opposed to simply beating people's brains out. There is a place for that, but the whole thing should be in perspective.

The guitar that you built, is that still your main instrument?

Yeah, my old home-made. I built it out of a piece of an old fireplace. I'd never built a guitar before, but I'd fiddled around building all sorts of things as a kid, with my father. So we just did lots of experiments. We looked

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at a few commercial guitars, and determined what was good and what was bad about them. At the time, I just couldn't afford to buy one, so we did experiments in stretching strings over blocks of wood to see where the stress points would be, and what kind of tremolo design would work.

Why did you settle on using that old mantlepiece?

It was just a nice old, well-seasoned piece of wood, maybe a 100 years old when I got it, with a few dead worm holes in it. You just can't find wood like that on new guitars. It's a beautiful piece, and that's what made the neck — we just carved it down by hand.

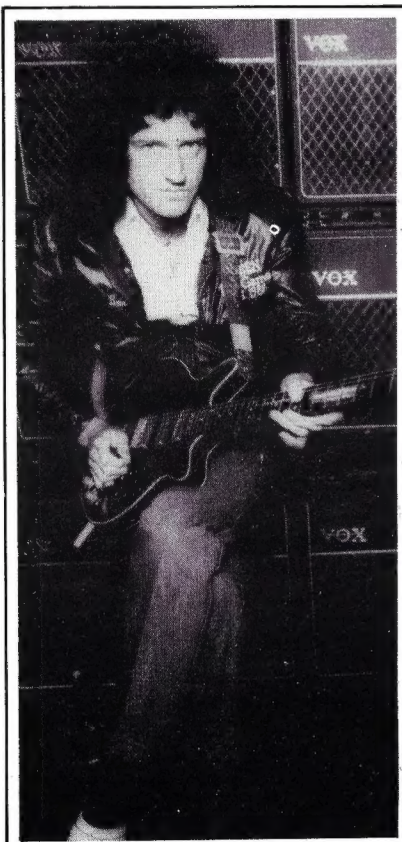
Do you think that the actual construction of the guitar contributes to your sound? Did you consider that as well?

A little, yeah. It was designed to feedback, as it's designed with acoustic pockets in what is basically a solid-body design, so the idea was that it would feedback at reasonably low frequencies where the fundamentals of the strings are found, as opposed to feeding back with a microphone effect, like where you get whistles from pick ups or a hum from the body. At the time I was making it, a lot of people were playing electrified acoustic guitars, which would feedback real easily, but at all the wrong places. Or else they would play cheap electric guitars, and they would feedback real easily, but would just sort of whistle and squeak, since the pick ups were acting like microphones. I was trying to direct all of the feedback energy directly into the strings. Now whether or not I actually succeeded in that, I don't know. It was probably more *luck* than any sort of technical success. But it seemed to work reasonably well for me... especially after I filled up the pick ups with an epoxy-resin glue. You see, the pick ups I used were burnt, and I think that the pick ups probably contribute more to the sound than anything as far as the guitar is concerned. And that's about all I use. I have used a Telecaster from time to time, and that was on "Crazy Little Thing..." which was probably the first time any other guitar was featured on our records. I also use an Ovation 12-string, which is one of their best acoustics with special electric pick ups, and I find that very good for live work as it sounds very much like an acoustic, with the mics up. And I just got an Ovation 6-string, which is featured on the new album which sounds very good to me in the stereo output and it

comes across very clean.

As far as your sound goes, what were, if we can use that hack expression, some of your influences when you first became aware of rock and the guitar?

It was mainly 50's American pop music, which made me want to play at the time. Like the Everly Brothers, Buddy Holly and the Crickets... I wasn't so keen on Elvis Presley, but I



did love his guitarist, and those on the old Rick Nelson discs. Most of the English music at that time was American derived, like Tommy Steele who had a very good guitarist, and then there was Lonnie Donegan who was an American blues-influenced player who more or less invented the term skiffle. But he would play adaptations of pieces by Leadbelly and Muddy Waters. I was very much taken up by that, and I think that's the first stuff I actually played on my acoustic guitar, which was a present on about my ninth or tenth birthday, but I had already picked up a few chords on a ukelele which my father had lying about.

How do you feel about Jimmy Page as a guitarist?

I like him very much. I've seen him play very good and reasonably indifferent, technically-wise. I like his

ideas.

He doesn't seem to have the same conceptual sensitivity or melodic knack that you have. And the arrangements don't seem as well thought out. It's much more riff oriented, and he'll tangent on those riffs, whereas you start with a melody and see it through.

It's just a different approach. A very aggressive, off-the-cuff style — I think a lot of what comes out on their records are first takes — and it has the kind of rough edge you get from that kind of approach. I like it very much. It is very different from my style, and it surprised me quite a bit when people said we sounded like that, because I don't think we do, really. The guitar is very much more overdriven in our style, à la Jimi Hendrix; whereas Jimmy Page has always struck me as being the ultimate amplified acoustic guitar, almost. It hardly matters that he has a solid-body guitar, because he doesn't actually use it to feedback through the guitar, just to make it very loud with a great impact. To be honest, I love all guitar players. I just love watching them work, but I suppose it was Hendrix most of all who helped me crystallize what I wanted to do in my mind. I'm different from Hendrix in that I appear to be more measured in my approach, like if you compare what he was doing with multi-tracking with what I'm doing. His stuff was more like do it, and leave it alone, and move on to the next thing. Whereas I tend to be more finicky and I want every part to be arranged perfectly so that every chord is right.

But doesn't that take away from the spontaneity that is the very essence of rock & roll?

It can do, and there's always that danger of over-refining things. But there are ways of getting around that in the terms of preparations; some things are really worth thinking about a lot before you actually pick up that guitar. So for some of those solos that have three or four parts, I was thinking about them a lot before I actually tried to put them down on disc. So when you get into the studio it's all so fresh because you're actually trying it out for the first time, and there's a great magic feeling when it all works out.

Can you point to examples where that fastidiousness paid off or where you perhaps overdid it.

Well, if we really felt we overdid it, we probably wouldn't put it out. I think in retrospect, perhaps some of that stuff on *A Day At The Races* was a little overdone, and that made it more stiff than it otherwise might've

been. But I wouldn't go back and change it, because I think it's very interesting in some ways if you want to get into the arrangements and find out what's there. As far as the positive things, I like a lot of the early things like *Killer Queen* which was my first attempt at a three-part, and it came off rather nicely, it's not too cluttered and all.

How much of that was overdubbed, and how much was the result of the way you used your echo to layer?

I do overdub a lot, but you learn that craft as you go along, as to what parts should be overdubbed to give you a certain richness and which parts should be left alone to give things that rough edge and rawness.

What's particularly striking to us is how much of that layering you're able to do live, in what we'd previously believed to be studio tricks. That was remarkable.

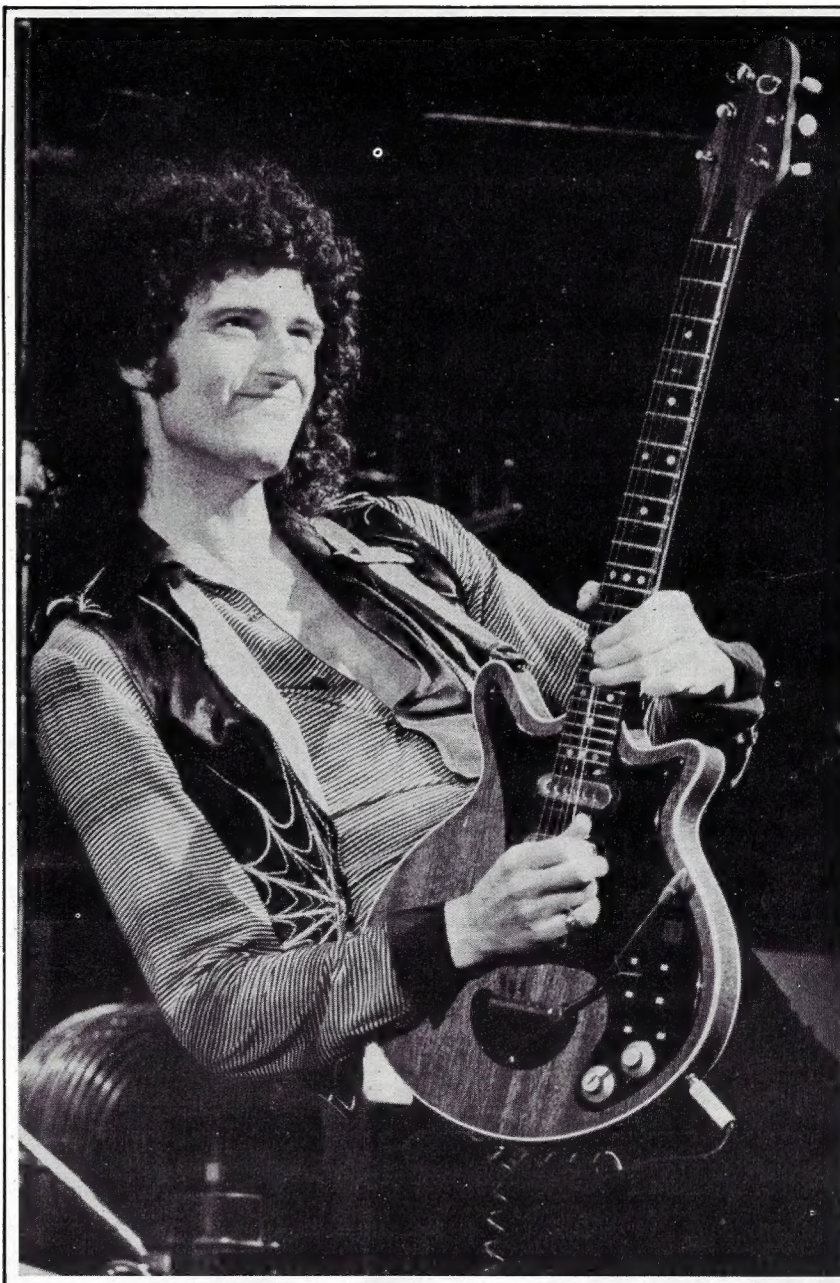
That's true. I can do a lot of it, especially with those repeat boxes, to create harmonies and all. But in a way I think you get away with a lot live because it's loud and in the excitement of a concert you really can't listen to more than a couple of things at once. Supposing you did have six guitar players on stage. It wouldn't really come across as that much more full than just one. Very often you can get away with things that maybe you couldn't on record. For instance, take a band like Z.Z. Top, one of my favorites. In concert they do everything as a trio, right, but on a record that would tend to come across a bit thin, so they add on a rhythm guitar part. You just don't notice the absence of a rhythm guitar on stage, because bass and guitar is about all you can take in at one time.

But with Queen live you do notice that richness, it's almost like the Mormon Tabernacle guitar...

I like that...

...it does sound like a choir in its own way. So how much is live and how much is Memorex? It's like you work a shell game with your guitars, with feedback, delay, etc.

It's a bit of all those things, but most important is to get the fundamental sound of the guitar right, with the right amp and the mics in the right place. If you get that down you're halfway home, because then you can get a single note to sound just like an orchestra. So in concert we spend a lot of time on the soundcheck to get it sounding rich naturally. And



then I'll work with the monitors to make sure I'm hearing the sound right onstage and to position myself to get the right kind of feedback. Having done all that, the only thing left is to use the effects like the delay correctly, but I've been getting into that less and less except for the free solo sections.

How much did the way you had gotten your guitar sounding influence Freddie to try and get some of the same effects with his voice? We hear a parallel between that stacked guitar harmony sound and the things he did with vocal overdubs.

That was just a coincidence, because those were two things we knew we had in our equipment. When we started the band we knew that we wanted to have a heavy group, and that we wanted harmonies to compete

with the heaviness; that was the very beginning framework of the group. The other important ingredient was that we wanted to have proper songs and not just riffs, that excuse for a jam that a lot of people were doing. The songs would have to be the basis for everything.

Did you consider yourself a heavy-metal band at the time? Because you were also sort of locked into that whole glam-rock thing because of the presentation.

Hmmm... heavy, except it wasn't called heavy metal back in those days. It was called... progressive rock. I think that's what we thought we were — progressive. We would play heavy music, but with experimental overtones. About that glam rock thing, that was also a coincidence, because

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we were trying a very dramatic presentation to go with the dramatic music, and as very often happens with those things, there were a lot of other people around who had come to those same conclusions, because at that time it was very much a case of go out there, play your music, and who cares if people can't see you very well. We were a reaction to that kind of philosophy. There were many other people at that time — most notably David Bowie — who beat us to the punch, really, which we were pretty annoyed about, because we'd been messing around in the studio and trying to get our contract together for a year-and-a-half, by which time Bowie had made his stance, and Roxy Music were well on their way. We felt that we had suffered in being left behind, and luckily we got our due because everybody has their own style, but it was very frustrating for us in those early days.

And so you got dismissed as imitators.

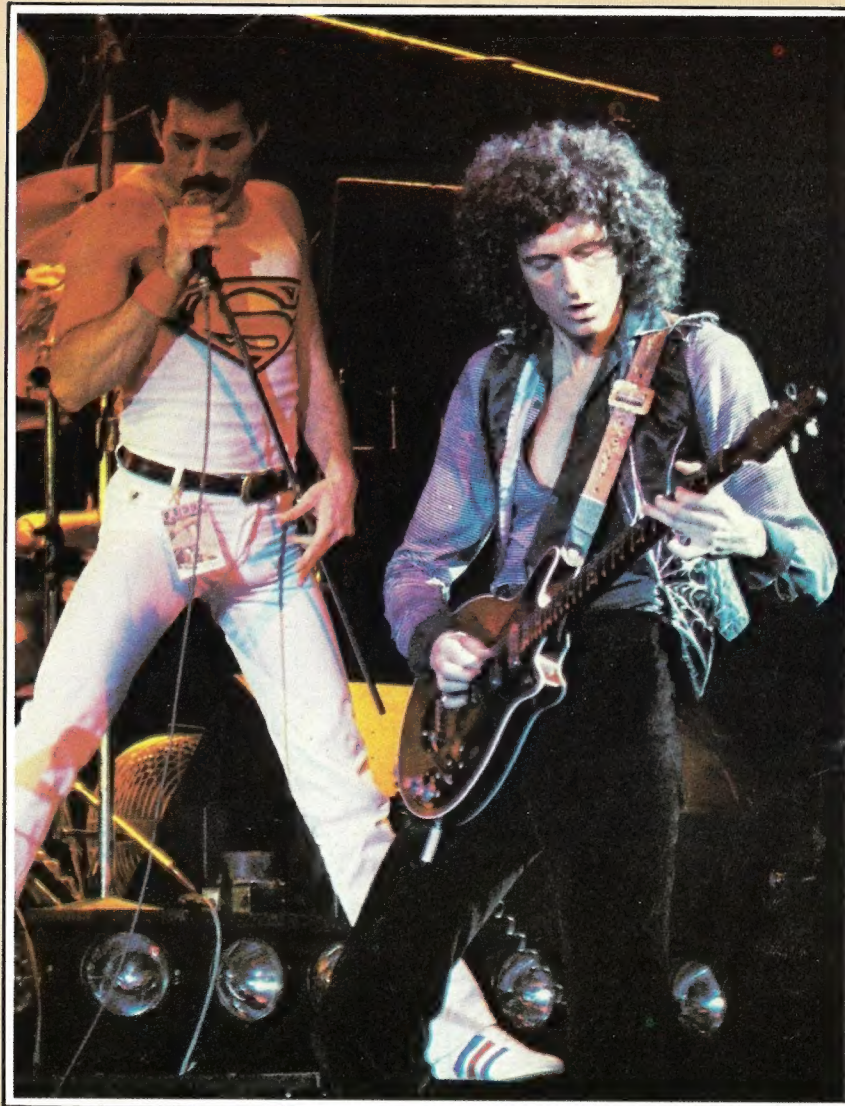
Right, and everybody goes ha ha that's glam rock, which really irritated us, because who wants to be lumped into someone else's category. We always considered it more dramatic rock than glam rock, anyway.

Well, the thing that always set apart Queen from so-called glam rock and much of heavy metal was the fastidiousness of your sound. No bum notes, no glossing over, none of that "we'll fix it in the mix" business. Were you fixated with perfection?

I think we were. We wanted to do it absolutely right because we'd had such bad experiences before. With Smile we'd gotten hurt by the organizational side of things, and even though we'd done a lot in the studio — which has disappeared — we never got over, which is I guess why we wanted everything to be impeccable on a musical and management basis so that when we went out there we were a finished product. We didn't want to have to make any apologies for not being quite ready. Luckily it all came together, and I mean luck because that's the biggest part. A lot of people do the same thing and don't break through.

Part of the bum rap that goes with that kind of perfection is that you were dismissed as a hype at that time, because the record company was supposed to have poured a lot of money into you...

Not very much in retrospect. What EMI did compared to what followed was real chicken feed. It was all very much a homegrown thing,



really. We just managed to create that illusion of being worth a million dollars. We were living on borrowed money for so long, and here everybody thought we were big stars. It was a lot of fun, but it probably backfired on us later on because people assumed that Queen was always there, and didn't have to work hard. We just wanted to be totally professional. We just figured that if we did our very best all the time, the people who came out to see us would keep coming back.

We have to confess as long-time listeners that what appeals to us the most are the early conceptions, those really weighty sounds. The more refined the sound became, the more it lost us, where the personality edge was being undermined by the presentation.

I think that we've always been pretty much the same live, pretty aggressive. Still, you've got to play the hits and all, but we're pretty much the same group, which is a good thing in many ways, because if we had changed live as much as we did on

albums people might have thought they'd lost the continuity. But luckily the people who like our music tend to follow us, so that we feel free to try anything on record. We're not obliged to just re-produce the last album.

Do you pay much notice to what the critics have had to say about you?

At the end of every tour and album we collect it all, and it's always very interesting to look at, but if you added it all up — the positive comments and the negative comments — it generally comes to more or less nothing. If you actually wanted to take their advice you wouldn't know what to do, because everybody has a different idea. Somebody might hate us because we're too complicated, and somebody might hate us because we're too simple. Do you see what I mean, because although there's a lot of people who love us and a lot of people who hate us, you couldn't really draw out of it a constructive improvement formula. So in the end we really don't take it seriously.

Yet in the very beginning,

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especially in England, you ran into some very heavy flack.

Oh, yeah, we were universally slighted. It was really a surprise. Having been hit that hard in the beginning I don't think we could ever be hit again. We thought at least a few people would realize what we were trying to do.

But why was the negative response so universal? You didn't even get airplay off of that record. Because by your own evaluation, people like Bowie and Zeppelin had laid the groundwork for you?

In America it was okay, and as far as airplay there was a reasonable amount of acceptance, but in England it was very bad. I don't think we got any reaction at all to the first album. I don't know, I think the image had a lot to do with it, like when people first saw Freddie they just couldn't take it — they thought here's some guy trying to pretend he's something he isn't. We were coming out and saying things that appeared to be very arrogant, and what people didn't realize is that we'd been working on this approach for a couple of years. It wasn't just somebody putting a group together overnight and going out saying we have something new. It was very well-honed, and it was ready, and people thought that was very arrogant. Also, there's the fact that journalists like to feel involved in the evolution of something, so generally when a group starts out, they'll make a few friends in the journalistic circle, and those people'll follow 'em around, and when the group does hit success, they generally feel very good about it, because they can say we were a part of it from the beginning, we discovered them or something like that.

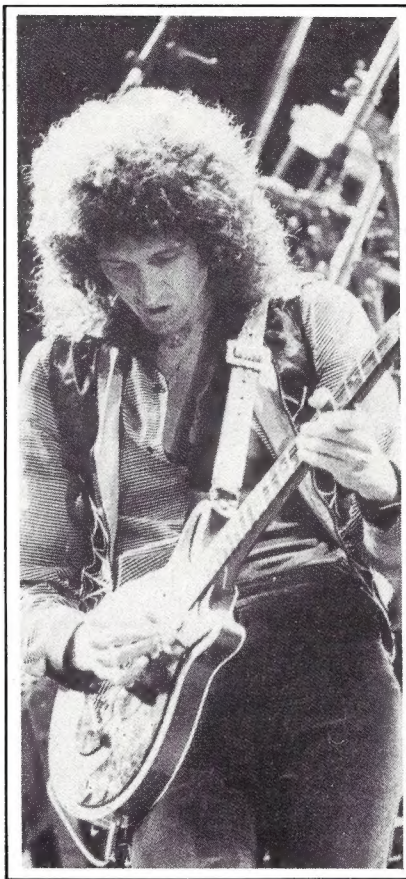
Well, that's very prevalent in British journalism.

Very much so. Whereas with us, we didn't have any friends in journalism, we didn't know anybody, so we were important — and I think that people don't like to be told that. After that, it was sort of a snowball effect, because we made it very plain that we thought most of the journalistic comment was utterly useless and worthless. So we and the press never got together after that.

Well, then there was another backlash later on with the whole punk movement, and bands like Queen, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin and Yes were universally regarded as the other generation, the dinosaurs. Did you feel at all chastened by that, did you feel

any need to get back to your roots?

We saw it as a natural thing, anyway; it was inevitable that people would come full circle and go back to the simpler stuff. So it wasn't really a shock. After a while you get a feel for the business, and you can predict what they'll catch on to next. But it was a strange feeling. You realize that it's



coming — you know you can't be the hero of the young people forever — but when it finally comes and people are looking at you like you're the establishment, like ITT or something which was always there, they don't realize that you were going through exactly the same things the young guys are now. It's not all that different.

Of course by that time, Queen was in effect a business as well as being a band. Having that kind of turnover as far as product goes is something that Chrysler would envy.

(Laughter) Yes, it's an inevitable step. And all those people who said that "we're never going to be like that, we're never going to be organized in that way, or have a big light show and PA and have people working for us" ... the people who said that who became successful, eventually followed the same road that we went along,

and it didn't take very long for people to discover that. And it was no use at all us saying that at the time, because if you tell people that, they don't want to listen. But nevertheless, about a year later, it was already happening with people like the Boomtown Rats, and the Clash using good equipment, and working with competent business managers and all that. There's no way out of that, unfortunately. For people who have really made it big, particularly a group like the Police, I would say their approach all along was really the same as ours. At any point they were willing to use the best, and that's why they made such rapid progress. They realized that their songs were good, and that anything that put those songs across best was worth doing. So they're going out with a stage set-up which is very similar to ours in terms of sophistication, and the use of delays and multi-track abilities live.

And the last thing people would think of comparing the Police to is Queen.

Sure, but I think their approach is very similar to ours. They're also very much perfectionists in what they do, and I think they're excellent in what they do. They're the best. Probably the Police in one breath were more of a shot-in-the-arm for English music than the rest of the so-called new wave put together. It's a new approach.

We just heard Roger Taylor's solo album, and frankly we thought that the first person in Queen to do a solo effort should be you, so we were a little disappointed. When might we expect something?

It has crossed my mind, but there's generally too much to do. I have material ideas for at least three solo records, but I can't make up my mind which to do first. I would like to do a real good heavy album. I would also like to do a proper album of guitar orchestration type stuff. And I would like to do an album of songs that I would sing that haven't really fit into the Queen format. The nice thing about Queen is that it gives a certain amount of outlet for heavy music but with a lot of room for melody and harmony. So I find Queen to be a really good vehicle for all the things I want to do, and I don't want to leave the band to do my own thing, even though there are points where I do get frustrated. But I think I would get more frustrated without Queen than I would with them. I think it's such an important thing. If you have a good group to work with, then take

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advantage of them. You can share the load, and be aware of how strong you are as a group.

What sort of things have you been thinking about in terms of guitar orchestration?

There's a couple of existing pieces I already have which I would like to try with a purely guitar approach, and there's a couple of things I've got about halfway written which would also benefit from that kind of treatment. And a couple of things for string orchestra and guitar which I'd like to try. There are a couple of things existing like that which I didn't put out because I thought it might appear...over-indulgent.

Are you aware that for years Jimmy Page has been trying to get an album of guitar orchestrations released?

Hmmm...no I don't think I know...well, you won't get a straight answer out of me on that one (laughter). I did hear a rumor, but no one's even got close to the way I'd want to do it. Guitar orchestration is something I've always wanted to do from way back, even before Smile, and I still feel nobody has really taken up the challenge of doing it. I remember one piece on a Jeff Beck record called "Hi Ho Silver Lining" where he double-tracked and went into harmony and probably decided "oh that sounds nice, I'll leave it in," but he never did it live. That really inspired me, and it was such a thrill to get into the studio and be able to do that sort of thing with Queen. We smacked right into it on *Queen II*, although there is "Keep Yourself Alive" on the

first record. By the second record we were well into...I hate to say orchestration, that's such a lugubrious word...but we did all those harmonies with vocals and guitar.

So you really didn't have to use synthesizers at all, which was your big boast for six or seven albums. Why did you finally use them on Flash Gordon?

We just finally thought, why not, without getting too carried away. It was a space movie, so those sounds were appropriate. I'm still not a big fan of synthesizers, even now, although they've come a long way from the early days when they were sounding real sterile and dry. They are, perhaps, a bit more human now, and there are a few people who can make them sit up and talk, but 95% of synthesizers which are supposed to sound like anything, usually end up making the same awful noises.

How do you feel about guitar synthesizers or even that thing that Lol Creme and Kevin Godley had, the Gizmo, which was supposed to be such a breakthrough item?

I always thought that was bullshit, from the start. To me it's a backwards step. Who wants to make a guitar sound like that, in that mechanical way. You see, the nice thing about the guitar is the way it developed with Hendrix and Jeff Beck and those people. You could use the feedback, and the air around you to get that sustain, and you didn't need a mechanical device to keep it going indefinitely. And that's where the excitement comes in, and the feel. That's what makes it rock & roll. It's that element of unpredictability. The

guitar when it's used to feedback is like an animal that needs to be controlled.

How do you feel about somebody like Eddie Van Halen?

I think he's just about the best of the best of the new guitarists...in fact, he's the best. Why'd you ask about him?

Well, he reminds us of you in his use of feedback for both melody and physicality.

He's so great. He's one of those guys who makes you want to go out and practice. Andy Summers is another. He's totally original, and completely in control of his style. And Jimmy in the Pretenders...he's not really flash in the old sense, but he has so many ideas, and such a great sound. As a guitarist myself I don't really think I've advanced as far as I should have. Most of the things I can play now I could play 10 years ago. *If anything I've learned what to leave out.* That's important. I think a lot of guitarists make that mistake of thinking they have to play everything fast, faster than they think, in which case it usually comes out sounding like wall to wall cliches. I think most guitarists play best when they work within their limitations. If you have time to think a little bit before you play each note, then you are getting to some sort of emotional statement, but if your fingers are running away with you, then really your feelings don't have a chance to come out. *The best thing most guitarists can do is slow down and let the instrument talk.* David Fricke,

Chris Doering & Chip Stern